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ABSTRACT

This paper offers suggestions to help social studies teachers improve the oral and written questions they pose in class and use pre- and post-question behaviors which enhance the chances for appropriate student answers. Seven types of questions are identified as useful questioning strategies in many social studies situations. They are recollection/recall, defining, topical, relational, comparative, preferential, and emotive. Examples and specific uses of each type of question are enumerated. It is suggested that, in addition to posing clear and concise questions appropriate for given situations, teachers can improve questioning situations if they adopt positive pre-questions behaviors. Among these behaviors are planning ahead, mentally rehearsing, making sure that students have all necessary information for answering the question, stating questions clearly and precisely, including cue words to help students focus their thinking, asking one question at a time, asking questions before calling on a student, and avoiding asking a large number of questions which require a simple yes/no response. Positive post-question behaviors are also suggested, including waiting in silence after the initial response to give the student a chance to think over what was said, refraining from continually calling on the same students, and helping students feel comfortable with periods of silent waiting and thinking. (DB)

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Improving The Effectiveness Of Your Questions:

Some A, B, C's Of Questioning

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Session Title: Classroom Questions That Work: Some A, B, C's of Questioning.

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ABSTRACT

Questioning behaviors play crucial roles within the interaction between teacher and learner. Ways to improve the specific language and grammar in questions are outlined to help ensure teacher questions are more clear, thus providing better guides for students in forming an appropriate answer. However, what the teacher says and does immediately before and after a well-phrased question strongly influences the likelihood of a student response. The suggestions for improving questioning outlined herein include ways to improve these pre- and post-question behaviors to compliment the question itself.

Improving The Effectiveness Of Your Questions:

Some A, B, C's of Questioning

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There is no doubt but that social studies teachers rely heavily on questions as a technique of instruction. Teachers use questions to help students develop understandings, form interpretations, comprehend relationships, and make decisions about content, events, and data. While teachers do use questions in abundance, the chances are great that they ask very imprecisely-worded questions which reduce the likelihood students will respond with an answer-much less a correct one.

Along with the tendency to ask "poorly worded" questions, teachers frequently use other behaviors both before and after their questions which further reduce the chances for a student response. There is a tendency for teachers to use patterns of questioning behavior which work counter to the goals of the teacher for the lesson. This handout focuses on exact steps the teacher can take to improve specific parts of as well as the overall questioning behavior that is used in discussions. Following these steps, you will improve your teaching effectiveness because you will be using questioning behaviors which will work for you.

We start this "mini-course" in improving questioning by introducing you to procedures to write/ask more precisely worded questions. The seven types of questions to be presented here are:

Recollection Questions. To ensure accurate and useful understanding, teachers need to find out whether or not students remember certain specific facts. Recollection questions are those which ask for specific, precise information which has been studied and is to be recalled. In these cases, the correctness of a student's response often can be checked against some original source. Sometimes referred to as "recall" questions, Recollection questions seek to find out what specific details students call remember from or about the subject matter material. Examples of Recollection Questions are:

--In what year did King John sign the Magna Charta?

--According to the text, what Egyptian pharoah was the original Oedipus?

--What is the number of U. S. soldiers who died in the Viet Nam War?

--Near what river did Custer's Last Stand take place?

Defining Questions. Frequently students are able to recall or recite vocabulary terms and pnrases which they do not understand. At the same time, teachers assume the student who recalls or recites a term also comprehends its meaning. Teachers must learn not to equate recalling or reciting a term with its understanding. Defining questions ask students to state clearly and accurately the meaning of a term or phrase so that they and others know how the term is being, has been, or is to be defined. Correct responses to Defining questions help to avoid semantical confusion and errors in interpreting the vocabulary students use. Clearly defined terminologies help to avoid problems which might cause misunderstanding or inaccurate understanding of the subject matter content being studied. Examples of Defining Questions are:

--What does the term "power" mean to you?

--As you define it, what are some clear examples of "competition"?

--How would Thomas Jefferson define "liberty"?

--What is a good definition of the term "civil war"?

--From the context provided, what does the work "scarce resource" mean?

Topical Questions. All too often teachers and students move from lesson-to-lesson and activity-to-activity without ever clarifying the specific focus for either. While there should be a central focus for each and every unit, lesson, and activity, rarely does the teacher identify this focus for students. Even rarer are the times when students themselves are called upon to state the focus of the unit, lesson, or activity. To continue to go from activity to activity without having students identify the focus of their study is to run the risk that they will not see the connection between what they are studying and any single idea or focus. If this practice continues, students begin to doubt that there is any unifying focus to what they are studying. To them activities and content become irrelevant and meaningless. Students ought to be asked regularly to identify for themselves and the class what the major focus of the unit, lesson, and activity is. Examples of Topical Questions teachers can ask to get these responses are:

--What is the major idea we have been covering during this entire lesson?

--If you could summarize this entire lesson into one main point, what would that point be?

--What title did the author give to this particular new story?

--What major concept did this activity stress?

--What idea did I say at the beginning of the class was the major focus of our study for today?

Relational Questions. Besides identifying the focus of study, students need also to explain how what they are studying is connected or tied to this focus. It is very likely that students may know the focus of study and the subject matter content before them without understanding the connection or relationship between the two. Relational questions ask students to identify and explain these particular associations. These questions help students realize the relevancy (or relatedness) of what they are currently studying to what they have studied or to the focus of instruction. Examples of Relational Questions are:

--How is this cartoon related to our study of "National Security Issues"?

--In what ways do this poem, "The Scab," fit in with our study of "labor movements"?

--How is this article on inflation tie in with the filmstrip on recessions we saw yesterday in class?

--In what way is the working habits of a historian tied to our study of "How Social scientists work"?

Comparative Questions. While recalled information is important, students need to understand how this information is similar to or different from other information or items they know or are studying. Comparative questions provide one means by which students can express their practical understanding of the social studies content or of a situation being studied. Comparative questions ask for the identification of how two or more things are similar to and/or different from one another. In their responses, students should use "...er" words (e.g., taller, shorter, milder, quicker, etc.), "...est" words (e.g., largest, fastest, Tallest, cheapest, etc.), or words prefaced by "more" or "less" (e.g., more often, less likely, etc.) to indicate the differential status of one item to another. In stating similarities, student answers should include a statement that two things "both" have a given characteristic (e.g., They both have two wheels. They are both painted purple., etc. or have the "same characteristic (e.g., They have the same shape. They are similar in size, etc.). Teachers are cautioned to listen carefully for such words so that they don't mistake their students' tendency to describe each item separately as an accurate answer to the Comparative question. Examples of Comparative questions are:

--What are three ways the U.S. Constitution is like the Magna Charta?

--How does a civil war differ from a revolution?

--During this period in English History, how were Whig and Tory politics different from one another?

--How were the explorations of these two nations alike?

--What is the difference between these two campaign platforms?

Preferential Questions. Questions can also be used towards getting students to reveal their personal choices and preferences. Preferential questions ask students to express their personal preferences, ratings, value choices, and rankings often in connection with such terms as "good," "bad," "better," "prettiest," "worse," etc.. In answering these questions, students report the value something has, what they prefer or like, or what rating they have assigned to something. In other cases they may report their own personal preferences or value judgments. Effective Preferential questions work to get student responses similar to those above. Examples of such questions include:

--What is the name of the greatest general of all time?

--What is the name of your favorite movie?

--Is it good that men put science to work to develop machines which pollute the environment?

--Of Israel, Egypt and Iran, which nation would be your first choice to visit?

--Which of these two economic policies do you like the best?

Emotive questions. Just as students have value reactions to the content and situations they study, they also may react emotionally to them. They get excited, angry, upset, anxious, sad, happy, bored, frustrated, and the like as they examine various situations and subject matter materials. Students have learned to avoid stating their emotions by answering "How do you feel..." questions with "I think..." answers. Sometimes students fail to reveal their feelings because they either are never asked to cite them or are not familiar with the vocabulary of expressing emotions. Like the area of values and preferences, teachers need to ask specific questions to help students identify, understand, reflect upon, and publically state their feelings in terms of the "language of emotions".

Emotive questions ask students to express their emotions using terms which signify feelings. By definition, answers to Emotive questions should contain words like "upset," "happy," "mad," "thrilled," etc..

If a student's response does not include a word like those just mentioned, it is probably not an emotive answer even though the question was an Emotive one. Usually, even "I feel that..." responses are not emotive answers. Emotive questions seek to help students put accurate labels on their personal feelings as well as assist them in talking aloud with others about their own feelings. To be most effective, Emotive questions should contain a cue feeling word to alert the students as to the general kind of answer which is being sought. The examples below of Emotive questions illustrate this point:

--When you heard the results of the election, were you excited?

--Does the potential use of the neutron bomb scare you?

--Are you upset by what you have just learned about your hero?

--If you found yourself in a dilemma such as this, would you be worried?

--What would be the best word to describe your feelings at this moment?

These seven types of questions provide the basic ingredients for a questioning strategy useful for guiding discussions as part of subject matter learning. Depending upon the objectives set for the lesson, the teacher varies the number, type, and order of these questions to guide student thinking and deciding. An example of a Standard Format of a classroom activity illustrates how these questions might be used in

Figure 1 about here

connection with a resource likely to be found in the middle, elementary, or secondary social studies classroom (see Figure 1).

Enhancing the Effectiveness of Teacher Questions

It is quite possible for teachers to learn to ask good questions and still wind up not improving their effectiveness in the classroom. This is because learning to word a question correctly is but one aspect of using questions which get positive results from students. In other words, there are a series of specific behaviors which may increase the effectiveness of the questions teachers may use. Within these patterns are found behaviors which can either improve or work against the likelihood that a single question will get an accurate and complete student response. There are available some ways that teachers can learn to improve their overall questioning behavior in addition to the asking of the question itself.

Some of the do's and don'ts of effective written and oral questioning behaviors suggest that teachers should:

- plan ahead of time the exact purpose and focus a discussion is to emphasize;

- write down a sampling of the most important questions which are to be asked during the discussion;

- make sure that any information students need to consider in addition to the question is given before the question is asked;

- ask questions which are clearly and precisely stated while avoiding those which are long and drawn out;

- include any cue words in the questions which would help students to focus their thinking in the direction intended by the question;

- take time, as necessary, before asking a question to mentally rehearse the question prior to asking it in the discussion;

- mix their questions among the types described above while avoiding prolonged, empirical-oriented discussions;

- ask only one question at a time and avoid the common error of asking two or three questions in rapid succession before students have a chance to answer any one of the questions;

- ask the question before naming the student who is to answer it;

- avoid asking questions which are so vague or poorly worded that they cause confusion or need to be restated;

- avoid asking large numbers of questions which seek only "Yes" or "No" answers.

Post-question behavior is also a critical component of an effective questioning strategy. For instance, the typical teacher waits only about one second after a question before:

(a) repeating the question
(b) asking another question
(c) calling upon another student to respond
(d) criticizing a student for a non-answer, or
(e) making some comment about the original question which usually includes some form of the desired answer

Even worse, when the teacher perceives the student as being incapable of answering the question due to their race, ethnic or socio-economic background, or academic limitations, the average wait time following the question is reduced to a half-second or less. People, especially children in learning situations, need more time than a second to: (1) think about the question and what it calls for; (2) retrieve and process information relevant to the question; (3) frame an appropriate response which can be understood by others; and (4) begin their oral statement of their comprehensive answer. For this reason, teachers should learn the skill of waiting after their questions for students to think through their responses.

There are several specific post-question behaviors which are directly related to "wait time" or "think time" teacher practices. It is suggested that teachers should:

- wait in silence at least three to five seconds following their questions for students to begin their answers as a response will usually be given before this period is up;

- wait in silence up to three to five seconds after a students' initial response to give the student a chance to think over what was said and decide on their own whether or not something else should be added or their first answer needs to be clarified;

- wait in silence for three to five seconds following one students response to see if other students want to volunteer their own reactions or any new information without have the teacher call upon them. (This helps students to develop student-to-student conversation/discussion skills as opposed to the typical student-through teacher to-student practice);

- refrain from continually calling on students who normally don't take enough time after a question to think about it or their answers (i.e., impulsive responders) and call more frequently on those students who generally are labeled slow responders since they often do take this time (i.e., reflective thinkers); and

- help students feel comfortable with and protective of their "wait-think time" since both teacher and students will feel awkward and uneasy at first with these periods of silence. Remember, students have probably never had an adult place so much value (and time) on giving them a chance to think. Interestingly, once students get accustomed to having periods of silence to do some thinking, they become quite protective of it and will demand it in situations where the teacher is in more of a hurry to get some talking from students than getting a well-thought out answer from them.

According to the research in teacher skill known as "wait time", teachers who wait 3-5 seconds and allow students time to think have students who give more accurate and complete answers more often, answer more questions, and participate in a wide variety of other positive ways. In short, waiting increases thinking, learning, and meaningful participation on the part of students.

Conclusion

Teachers should never lose sight of the fact that the primary reasons why they ask questions are to guide their students' thinking and to get accurate and complete answers from them about what they know, decide, value, and feel. Teachers interested in helping students understand the meaning of social strides content will find the seven types of questions described here helpful to this end. Those who are involved in values or affective education will find the last two questions very relevant to their needs. Those less concerned with values and feelings will still find the first five question types appropriate to their subject matter classroom discussions. At the same time, the teacher should remember that it is very easy to lose the effectiveness of a question by using other behaviors which work against the purposes and focus of these questions. To avoid this, teachers are encouraged to incorporate into their overall questioning strategies the suggestions and recommendations outlined above.

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